

Rapping at the Burmese Junta

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The chain-link gate slides open to reveal a group of young shaven-headed Burmese men and two girls sitting outside a house in Mae Sot, a scruffy town on the Thai side of the Thai-Burmese border.

All are members of Generation Wave, an underground group dedicated to overthrowing the repressive military junta that has ruled Burma since 1962. The odds are against them, as they have been against a long series of movements harboring in Mae Sot and Chiang Mai in Thailand. Nonetheless, Generation Wave has a certain amount of panache, attempting to reach Burma's youth by using rap and hip hop music and graffiti to inspire others to stand up to authority

"We've cut our hair Saffron style," said Aung Min, one of GW's founders, referring to the failed Saffron Uprising in 2007, in which tens of thousands took to the streets, led by Buddhist monks, only to have at least 135 people and possibly more shot down by the military. "If something happens in Burma we can go in there quickly and mingle with the monks."

They are hoping against hope that 2010 could provide the first opportunity since 2007 for widespread anti-government protest, with the junta's plans for an election which has been derided widely as a sham engineered to prohibit any prominent opposition candidates from running.

"I don't see any big movement ahead of the elections. People will wait and see. But if the election result angers the people then that could be the first opportunity," said Win Min, a Burmese analyst based in Chiang Mai, Thailand. *"Groups like Generation Wave can't bring about change on their own. But they do pose a new kind of challenge to the junta and will be a driving force once the opportunity does arrive."*

Generation Wave grew out of the 2007 uprising. Marching with thousands of others on the streets of Rangoon gave Aung Min and a few friends a whiff of freedom that they were unwilling to let go of once the demonstrations had been quelled.

"When I saw the marchers I thought, wow. I joined them and felt very free," said Aung. *"At that moment we felt we could change our regime. But all we got was bullets. I thought no, I don't want this to end."*

Inexperienced in political activism, Aung and his friends began by publishing a statement asking people to stay indoors in support of the monks. It was roundly ignored. They started spraying slogans on walls, distributing leaflets and organizing demonstrations in Rangoon, which with about five million residents is Myanmar's biggest city.

The group stayed one step ahead of the police by using a safe house and communicating via mobile phones hired by the month from their owners for about US\$50. Mobile phone ownership is not widespread in Myanmar because of the prohibitive cost and calls are liable to be listened to, but *"they can't listen to all the numbers at once,"* Aung Min said. The friends also ran the gauntlet of the authorities' networks of informers, some of whom pass information to the police in return for being allowed to continue illicit activities such as running casinos or gambling operations based on the Thai lottery.

But in March 2008 one of Generation Wave's members was arrested. Aung Min was lucky. He was travelling abroad with his job and after hearing of the arrest made his way to the NLD office in Mae Sot. At Mae Sot, separated from the Burmese town of Myawaddy by the Moei River, Burmese without papers cross the porous border on inflatable rubber rings to buy cheaper goods and access free medical and education programs run by NGOs.

Generation Wave was given the use of a house there from which it began running training sessions, with young Burmese crossing the porous border to attend talks on human rights, non-violent action and community organizing. Every two months they launched a new campaign inside Burma, targeting issues such as the government's inability to provide electricity to its people.

"Most of the Burmese people know they are right to oppose the government but they don't know their rights, so we need to tell them. Then they can use their knowledge to persuade others inside Burma," said Aung Min.

As they have come to the attention of the authorities, more and more Generation Wave members have been arrested. About 30 of its 100 members have now been detained, Aung Min said. Membership is illegal and is punishable by a jail term of up to five years, but in practice members know they could be imprisoned indefinitely.

Now about 10 Generation Wave members are living in the Mae Sot safe house. Their logo - a red spray-painted stencil of a fist with the thumb up - has been spray-painted large on one of the external walls. Inside, a young man watches a DVD about the the Solidarity movement in Poland while "I want to make revolution songs," says 9KT, a rapper. "First I make a beat and a bass loop. Then I write the lyrics. The people are suffering, they don't have enough food. So we say, don't stay on the wrong side, stand up for your rights."

9KT and another rapper, AK, have just put together a Generation Wave compilation CD that members crossing the River Moei back into Burma will distribute to their friends. The CD features song titles such as "Let's Get Up" and "Please excuse, Ma," in which the rappers apologize to their mothers for becoming involved with politics, a dangerous game in Burma.

"This way we can get young people interested. These songs are not necessarily explicitly political. They are accessible and our message can be easily understood," said 9KT. Thus, by riding popular youth culture, Generation Wave hopes to inspire young Burmese to similar activism.

"We need to be a source of admiration for young people, so they will want to do the same thing in our style, with the belief they can kick out the regime and make a revolution," said Aung Min.

The group's distinctive style does attract new members despite the risks.

"I was with another group and came here for leadership training. I stayed with GW because it was made up of young people and the style is freer," said Aung Nge, a skinny 24-year-old from the Pa-O minority in Myanmar's Shan State.

Aung Nge helps out by monitoring the media in Myanmar and hopes one day to set up an NGO to help some of the estimated 240,000 Burmese who have HIV or AIDS.

Generation Wave has a few rules - only Burmese who live in Burma are accepted as members. They must be prepared to be active and they must be between the ages of 17 and 35 years.

"When we are old, we tell children not to play with fire because they will get burned. But maybe we need to play with fire. That's why we have the age limit," said Aung Min, who is 28.

Also living in the Mae Sot house are Ko Lin, a 33-year-old from Bago, near Rangoon, whose ambition is to write about social issues “without the need for a censor”, and a 28-year-old who gives his name as 2P, the name of a famous Burmese cartoon character, an unlucky hunter. 2P recently spent three months in prison after hurling a stone at government men who were driving through his town shouting at residents through a megaphone to give their approval to the new constitution, part of the preparations for next year’s elections.

“I saw these guys singing about a vote with a tick and I didn’t like it,” said 2P, smiling broadly. “I had to do something. I threw the stone at the car, it bounced off the wing mirror and hit the announcer and then I thought I would flee by motorbike but they caught me. They were very angry.”

Generation Wave is nonpolitical, but it supports Aung San Suu Kyi as the democratically-elected leader of Myanmar and her portrait hangs in the Mae Sot house. However, despite the example of Daw Aung, or The Lady as she is popularly known, women don’t play much of a role in Burmese political life and there are only a handful of girls in Generation Wave.

“Most Burmese women don’t feel they are like Aung San Suu Kyi because she’s the daughter of our independence hero and so it was easy for her to go into politics,” said Aung Min’s girlfriend Ei Ei, a petite 28-year-old. “But it’s true that we women need to open our minds. We shouldn’t be so shy and we should think politically. Women need to be more brave, we should have more self-belief.”

Wai Wai, 27, was more self-assured. A former work colleague of Aung Min’s, she quit her job after the Saffron uprising in order to get more involved. *“I want a peaceful country to live in with a good economy so there is no need to go to another country, like Thailand, where life is tough. I want to be able to live a quiet life in Burma,”* she said.

Both Aung Min and Win Min say dialogue between the US and Burma’s generals is a good thing.

“It’s better than using just one approach,” said Win Min. “But it’s all up to [Burma’s ‘Senior General’] Than Shwe, if he is willing to compromise to have sanctions lifted, for example by holding free and fair elections. But I don’t see any sign of that.”

Meanwhile, as night fell at the GW safe house, Aung Min said his group hoped for some kind of positive change in Burma in the next three years.

“We would like to get our normal life, therefore we need to change things,” he said. *“We want to go back to Burma, therefore we need to fight.”*

(All of the names given by Generation Wave members for this article are aliases)

P.S.

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